

# STATE OF THE RIVER 2001

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## RIVER PROFILE

The Detroit River is unquestionably one of North America's great rivers in the heart of the Great Lakes Basin. It connects the Upper Great Lakes to the Lower Great Lakes. More than that it links Canadians and Americans through an inseparable border. The Detroit River is an invaluable, multifaceted resource that serves as the foundation of our economies, provides numerous recreational and historical opportunities, and ecological values, and enhances "quality of life."

Prior to and during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Native Americans and French explorers used the Detroit River as the primary transportation route. The importance of the Detroit River as a transportation route and center was manifested by the fact that more ships were built along the Detroit River during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century than any place in the world.

As human population growth increased in communities during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the Detroit River was used for discharge of pollutants and assimilation of wastes. During this era municipal and industrial waste caused substantial pollution. For example, the discharge of untreated municipal waste caused many waterborne disease epidemics during the late 1800s and early 1900s. Relocation of municipal water intakes, enhanced water purification techniques, and wastewater treatment eliminated waterborne disease epidemics during the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Oil pollution occurred in the 1940s-1960s, causing many winter duck kills. Today, winter duck kills due to oil pollution no longer occur because of industrial and municipal pollution control programs. Phosphorus pollution occurred during the 1960s-1990s, resulting in cultural eutrophication of Lake Erie. During this time, a U.S.-Canada phosphorus control program was implemented resulting in over a 90% reduction in phosphorus loading from the Detroit River. Lake Erie has responded with improvements in water quality and the fishery. Toxic substances contamination has been well recognized in the Detroit River since the 1960s. Pollution prevention and control programs since that time have resulted in substantial improvements. For example, mercury contamination of fish has declined by 70% since the mercury crisis of 1970. PCB contamination of herring gull eggs on Fighting Island has declined 85% since the late 1970s. However, despite such reductions in toxic substances contamination, public health advisories remain in effect on a number of Detroit River fishes. Concurrently during this era of pollutant discharge and waste assimilation, the Detroit River shoreline was substantially developed, resulting in over a 95% loss of coastal wetlands. Efforts are now underway to protect the remaining habitats and rehabilitate degraded ones.

During the 21<sup>st</sup> Century the Detroit River is being rediscovered as a recreational resource and a key ingredient in improving "quality of life." Like throughout most regions of the United States, communities and businesses are making the Detroit River their front door. Greenways are being created from Lake St. Clair to Lake Erie and up the tributaries like the Rouge, Ecorse, and Huron Rivers. Waterfront redevelopment is resulting economic benefits and is furthering environmental stewardship and preservation of history and culture.



### Community Project Priorities

Out of a list of 150 proposals, six first phase priority projects have been identified:

- Restoring Historic Fort Wayne;
- Improving the crown jewel of Detroit's park system called Belle Isle;
- Undertaking mixed use redevelopment of brownfield site;
- Furthering linked riverfront greenways;
- Restoring Black Lagoon along the Trenton Channel of the Detroit River; and
- Promoting "soft engineering" of shorelines.

Although only six first-phase priorities were set by the Greater Detroit AHR Initiative, it was agreed that no projects would be dropped from the original list of 150 and that AHR would pursue additional projects as the opportunities emerge.

### Accomplishments and Resources Leveraged

One major accomplishment has been reaching agreement on and disseminating a community vision:

*"We are filled with pride for our magnificent river and have a shared vision for its regeneration. Our vibrant international waterway inspires a community brimming with fun and excitement, rest and relaxation. A broad diversity of jobs, housing, historic interpretation, recreation and culture breathe life into a 24 hour a day waterfront. Industry, commerce, and tourism growing in harmony with the environment sustain fish, birds, animal, and plant habitats. The River has become the region's front door with access to all inland communities. Its beauty and integrity have been restored, and we thrive within its ecosystem."*

This vision has been shared up and down the river by community and business partners, and the River Navigator. Support for the River Navigator position comes from U.S. Department of Transportation in partnership with the St. Lawrence Seaway Development Corporation, Federal Highway Administration, and the U.S. Coast Guard.

Another accomplishment has been forming partnerships for priority projects. During the first year ending September 2000, a total of \$3.1 million was raised for AHR priority projects. This represents a 25:1 return on the federal investment in the first year. Examples of projects implemented in the first year with these resources include:

- Rehabilitating the shoreline of Blue Heron Lagoon on Belle Isle;
- Securing the services of a U.S. Department of Interior employee to work with the City of Detroit on federal land issues at Fort Wayne and build the city's capacity to reopen and restore it;
- Constructing greenway trails and pocket parks along the river;
- Developing a preliminary restoration plan for Black Lagoon through the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers;
- Convening a major conference on "soft engineering" of shorelines and preparing a best management practices manual for promoting application; and
- Partnering in implementing 10 demonstration projects of "soft engineering" along the Detroit River shoreline.

Considerable efforts have been made to further education and outreach. The Greater Detroit AHR Initiative secured the *pro bono* services of a non-profit organization to set up and host the Greater Detroit AHR homepage (website: [www.tellusnews.com/ahr](http://www.tellusnews.com/ahr)). In addition, the services of a Petty Officer in the U.S. Coast Guard were obtained to serve as webmaster in the first year. Over 30 newspaper, magazine, and newsletter articles were published and over 60 presentations were made to various groups, organizations, and events in the first year. Student interns from University of Michigan-Dearborn, Henry Ford Community College, and Cass Tech High School in Detroit were involved in education and outreach projects.

## Future Challenges

The Greater Detroit AHR Initiative has enormous potential to enhance “quality of life” for communities and businesses up and down the Detroit River. For the Greater Detroit AHR Initiative to continue to be effective and reach its full potential, the following actions need to be taken over the next two years:

- Continue to receive access to federal administrators and federal agencies to help communities revitalize riverfronts, restore precious habitat, preserve cultural and historic resources, save open space, create recreational opportunities, and spur economic growth;
- Continue to receive support and priority from the AHR Task Force in Washington, D.C. or a comparable institutional structure;
- Continue to receive project management and administrative support at the local level from Metropolitan Affairs Coalition;
- Secure funding from the Transportation Enhancement Program and other sources for constructing a 4.5 mile trail that will link 4,800 acres of parkland in Downriver communities to the lower Detroit River;
- Secure funding from the Transportation Enhancement Program for restoring the Bus Stop Shelter/Comfort Station on Detroit’s 980-acre island park called Belle Isle;
- Secure funding from the U.S. Urban Park and Recreation Recovery Program to restore the Flynn Pavilion and reopen a canoe/bicycle rental facility which have historically been part of the Belle Isle experience;
- Secure resource support from the U.S. Department of Interior for the restoration of Historic Fort Wayne in Detroit;
- Secure funding through the Water Resources Development Act and the Clean Michigan Initiative for the rehabilitation of Hennepin Marsh and Black Lagoon;
- Continue to promote education and outreach through activities like the 2001 State of the Strait Conference, other Detroit 300 activities underway to celebrate the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the French settlement of the region, and the Greater Detroit AHR web site,
- Continue to work with businesses on common objectives like furthering linked greenways and demonstrating soft engineering of shorelines; and
- Obtain administrative or capacity building support for the Detroit River Navigator in order to fulfill expectations of community and business partners, and to facilitate the unique partnerships required to deliver priority projects.





### Greater Detroit American Heritage River

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*"A river is a thing of grace and beauty, a mystery and a metaphor, a living organism whose processes have been perfecting themselves through the ages, shaping our landscapes into works of art greater than those found in any museum. Rivers feed us physically and spiritually. They determine where we live, what we eat, what we drink, and where we dance. We write songs, stories, and poems about them. We go to them in order to learn about ourselves. They provide a place of meditation, a place for celebration."*

*The International River Network*

## GREATER DETROIT AMERICAN HERITAGE RIVER PARTNERSHIP

The Greater Detroit American Heritage River (AHR) Initiative is a multi-stakeholder process designed to achieve, sustain, and celebrate our communities, economies, histories, cultures, and environments. Oversight of the Initiative is provided by a four person Executive Committee that includes:

- Mr. Peter Stroh, former Chief Executive Officer of The Stroh Companies, Inc. and Chairman of the Executive Committee;
- Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer represented by Ms. Nettie Seabrooks, Chief of Staff to Mayor Archer;
- Wayne County Executive Edward McNamara represented by Mr. Dewitt Henry, Assistant County Executive; and
- Supervisor W. Curt Boller, Supervisor of Brownstown Township and member of the Downriver Community Conference.

A multi-stakeholder Steering Committee is also in place to provide advice to the Executive Committee. Project management and administrative support is provided by a public-private partnership of business, labor, and governmental leaders called Metropolitan Affairs Coalition.

The heart of the AHR Initiative is locally driven and designed solutions. The federal government role is fostering community empowerment and helping provide focused attention and resources to help river communities revitalize their economies, renew their culture and history, and restore their environment. The Initiative integrates the economic, environmental, and historic preservation programs and services of federal agencies to benefit communities engaged in efforts to protect and enhance their rivers. Further, it encourages investment in river communities, promoting partnerships and leveraging of state, nonprofit, and business resources. The Greater Detroit AHR Initiative is based on adaptive management where priorities are set, projects implemented, and results measured in an iterative fashion for continuous improvement.